

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Eleven

John Wagner and the Mission "Stunt"

JOHNNY WAGNER was hungry again. He peeked in the pans cluttering the stove; except for some food sticking to the edges, they were empty. When a fellow hasn't eaten since yesterday morning, he is hungry, isn't he? It could happen in Buffalo, New York, as in this case, or, anywhere else, for that matter.

In the living room, a woman laughed. Drunk again, Johnny thought. She was his Russian stepmother, Sonya. If his father hadn't been so drunk himself, he'd never have married her. And if only Mom hadn't died, everything would have been fine. Johnny slammed the cover back on a dirty cereal pot.

The laughing in the other room stopped. Johnny heard a strange man's voice, then Sonya stumbling out toward the kitchen.

She teetered through the door with a curse. "You stealing food again?" she snarled.

"I'm sorry," Johnny mumbled. "I'm hungry. Haven't had nothing to eat since yesterday morning."

"Well, go some place else to mooch food. You just hang around here to spy on me when I'm entertaining my friends so's you can tell your old man."

"No, honest." He watched with horror as Sonya reached for the razor strap hanging over the sink. "Don't hit me."

The woman grabbed for Johnny's arm. She struck him first on the back, then on the shoulder. As he writhed, she struck him again and again.

"I won't have an eight-year-old youngun spying on me. I'll show you who's boss. Now get out."

Johnny did get out. A year later, he got out for good.

Slipped down the stairs one night and cut across town to the railroad yards.

He hesitated at the edge of the yards, listening to the trains rattle and sigh into their switches. Sounds were like so many big animals out there in the dark. He shivered as he fingered one of the welts from a recent beating.

Then he dodged between two passenger cars and ran until he came to an empty freight. No one in sight, so he climbed inside. It was dark but he was safe.

He groped along over the wooden floor on his hands and knees until his head pushed into something soft. "Hey, look out!" a voice barked at him.

Johnny's heart bounced against his chest. "Oh, oh, I didn't know anybody was here, Mister."

"Well, you know it now, Sonny. Get your head out of my lap," the voice went on.

"Oh, sure, I'm sorry. It's dark in here." Johnny's words came out with a squeak.

"Course it's dark. What else you expect? Maybe you'd like me to light a lamp for you, a nice soft, rose-colored lamp, with fairies playing games or barnyard animals on it.

"What are you doing here anyway, Kid? Wait, don't tell me. You're running away from home because your stepmother beats you, your father is a drunkard and you don't get no love, nor even enough to eat."

"That's right, Mister. How'd you know?"

Johnny watched a light shine through a crack in the side of the freight car. He could see the man now. As old as his Dad, but his face looked as if it smiled more. Only he hadn't shaved for a long time, maybe two weeks. Johnny saw the man stretch. He reached over and patted Johnny on the shoulder.

"You really don't get enough to eat, Kid?"

"Honest."

"And the old woman really beats you?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, there's some that would tell you to get on home. Maybe they'd push you out of the car, or maybe they'd even take you home themselves. I'm not one that believes that home is always the best place to be."

"Take me, for instance. I think life's pretty good and I don't have no home. No, I'm no bum, mind you. I'm a hobo and there's quite a difference.

"But boy, it isn't good for you not to have nobody at all. So I'm going to let you join up with me, if you want." His talk hurried on. "It's a good life. Me and you could travel together, see the country. You could - work for me, learn about life. We'd get enough to eat, too. How about it? It ain't good for a fellow your size to be on his own. Why don't you join up with Old Steve?"

Johnny Wagner didn't answer Steve at first. Maybe he should go home after all. But this funny old man who didn't shave said he'd have enough to eat. And he liked Johnny; that was important. "Sure," Johnny told the hobo, "I'd like to go with you."

For the next four years, Johnny and Steve didn't separate for a day. Steve kept his word. They saw the country together - the cities, the towns, the freight yards, the hobo camps and the saloons. Johnny had enough to eat, too. Steve taught him how to "bum" food from a farmer's wife, a dime from a businessman on a city street. Steve was generous, too, gave Johnny his first bottle of liquor on his eleventh birthday. They had each other. "And that means a lot," they always said.

Only time they ever had an out was when Johnny wanted a drink worse than Steve did, and those days got closer and closer together.

One day, when Johnny was thirteen, he and Steve flopped for the night in an Ohio farmer's cornfield. Johnny lay watching the stars. "Steve's getting old," he thought. "I could do better by myself. He's always crabbing when I want a bottle. I could get away right now. He won't wake up till the sun hits him. But he's been good to me, the old coot. I sure wish I could go to sleep and stop figuring anything. The way he does. He just goes along, living. And I keep worrying."

Steve snorted in his sleep, woke up with a shudder.

"What say, Johnny, boy?"

"Nothing, Steve. Just thinking out loud, I guess."

Steve rolled over. "Most dangerous thing in the world. Never touch the stuff myself."

But Johnny kept on thinking. Next day, when he and Steve tried to panhandle a meal in downtown Cleveland, he thought faster than usual. Coming around the corner were two cops. Steve tried to zigzag sideways into a store, but one cop dashed after him. The other went after Johnny. Johnny broke into a run. "Let the old man take it. I got to get away," he thought. After two blocks, the cops quit the chase. Johnny stopped running. "This is as good a time as any to make the break," he figured. "Good-by, Cleveland; good-by, Steve."

At first, he tried a farm job. Eight dollars a month then, and room and board. But the country was a tough spot to find a drink. And somehow at night, he kept remembering Steve. When he was seventeen, he collected his last pay and told the farmer he was through. "Think I'll go home for a visit. Haven't seen my family for quite a while," he told him and swaggered down the lane.

The sun was shining when Johnny walked into his father's house in Buffalo. His father sat in the big chair over in the corner, blinking his bloodshot eyes. Then he took a long drink and put the glass down on the arm of the chair.

Johnny started toward him. The rooms were dirty but after all, it was home. "Hi," Johnny called out. "It's me, Johnny. Thought I'd come home for a change."

His father swore, then he laughed. "Listen, you little punk. You were too good to live under my roof when you were younger. Now you come in here out of the blue, falling on your face, trying to make up for it. Well, you can fall flat for all I care. My roof's too good for you now. Get out an' stay out." His exclamation point was a hiccup.

"O.K., O.K.," Johnny answered. "This is the last time I make a stab at living decent."

He "hoboed" around the country until 1916, when the draft shipped him overseas with the 132nd Infantry. After the war and back in the states, he found Chicago and Skid Row.

He liked it down on West Madison, liked it so well he stayed for the next twenty-eight years. "You can pick up the price of a bottle here faster than in any small burg I know," he told the fellow sitting next to him in a bar one day.

"Like today. I had three jobs. I passed some handbills, and I washed dishes. Then I carried some signs." He tossed some coins on the counter. "So tonight I'll have me three bottles."

"And I got a place to sleep tonight, too." He drained his first bottle. "The gentleman I passed bills for is going to let all of us sleep on the roof of his business place. All we got to do is pick up our newspapers in the morning. A real gentleman, he is."

John Wagner thought Skid Row was all right-except for the policemen. They bothered John. They were everywhere. When he slept on a Park bench, they were in back of it, shouting at him to move on. If he got tossed out of a bar for a little noise and flopped in an alley, they nabbed him for sure. "I know all the policemen on this beat by their first names," he bragged. "Yeah and they know me. Well, at least it's warm in jail." He shuddered. "But there's no liquor and you got to work in there, too."

But in a mission, John could escape from the police.

One night he felt sick, so he careened into a Madison Street mission and drowsed through the service. He woke up at the altar call. He listened for a minute, then pulled himself down the aisle.

Up front, they were kneeling. John knelt too. Somebody next to him was talking and praying. John repeated a few words. Then he let himself be led upstairs and given a ticket for a free bed.

The bed was softer than he had been accustomed to and the place clean. John slept well. He gulped down breakfast, made sure the man who had prayed with him the night before wasn't watching, and slipped out the side door.

The nearest saloon was half a block away. The bartender greeted John with gusto. "You're looking good today, John."

John smirked. "Had a good sleep last night. Been over at a mission on Madison. Make it straight."

"Say, what they make you do at those joints?"

"I don't know. You sit through a meeting. Then you get saved."

"Saved?"

"Yeah, you get saved." "Are you saved, John?" "Sure. Guess so."

The bartender set the drink in front of John. He wiped his hands on his apron. "Brother, if you're saved, I'd hate to be lost."

"Got to remember that mission stunt," John told himself. "It'll be good on cold nights or nights I don't feel so hot."

The mission stunt was still a good one in 1948. One night, March 2, that winter, he meandered down South State Street. His arms and face were swollen from cheap wine. The hem of his overcoat flapped loosely against his legs. One shoe had no lace, the other was tied with string.

"I'm a sick man," he thought. "Got to have a flop. Maybe I'd better try a new mission. The old ones are all wise to me."

"Here's one," he said. "Pacific Garden."

He fell into a seat. The piano was being played. The old man next to him looked up, spat on the floor. Then he leaned over and whispered, "Whole business makes you sick, don't it?"

"Yeah," John said.

"Hear the music?" The old man poked John. "Supposed to make us think of home and-" He sighed, loudly. "And dear old mother."

John wished the old man hadn't said that. He was thinking of home, and his own mother. "Shut up," he commanded.

Why didn't the man up front give the invitation and get it over with? All John wanted was a flop. "Now, what's that about a prayer room?" he wondered. "Never heard of that. Thought I knew all about these joints."

"What's in that prayer room he's yakking about?" he asked the old man.

"Nothing."

"I always went down front in the other places," John whispered.

"Some do and some don't," the old man answered. "I'm going to the prayer room."

The old man pulled his tattered overcoat closer to him, edged away from John. "You're crazy. You been."

"Maybe this is different."

"Naw, all the same." The old man peeped through his cracked glasses at John. "Some do, some don't," he repeated.

John pitched forward toward the prayer room. The man in the doorway reached out and caught his arm. "How are you feeling?" he said.

"Sick," John told him. "And I'm too bad for GOD, too." "Nobody's too far for CHRIST to reach."

John sat down. "The man talked so much about this room, I thought GOD might be here."

"He is," the man said quietly. "Why don't you call out to Him?"

John covered his face with two dirty hands. "I know what to say. I've said the words before at every other mission place. Only this time, I mean it.

"JESUS? You here? I'm on the level. Come on in and clean me up, please. I'm dirty all through and awful tired."

Two years later, in 1950, John was walking down a Chicago street when he saw two men in a squad car driving by at about ten miles an hour. The car stopped a block ahead, as if it were waiting for John.

John didn't escape down an alley. He stepped alongside the car and smiled at the men. "Hi, Clancey," he called. "Hey, there, Pat."

The two men looked at each other. "It is - it is - old Johnny Wagner," Pat told Clancey. "I thought it was you, but Clancey and me both says, 'Let's stop the squad car and see.' We was just saying the other day, 'Wonder what ever happened to Johnny Wagner?' We haven't hauled you in for a long time."

John beamed. "Look me over, boys. How do I look? Like a new man?"

Clancey whistled. "Sure and you do! And that uniform, you're wearing, John boy. You're a special copper yourself, John. Now, that is a miracle."

"Yes, and the miracle's on the inside," John said. Clancey and Pat shook their heads. "I don't get it."

What happened? You were sleeping it off last time we saw you."

John put his foot on the squad car running board, leaned in the car window. He had to put this over to them. "Pat, Clancey, I got a Friend now. For the first time in my life."

"He must be quite a friend to do all this for you. What's his name?"

"He is quite a Friend," John agreed. "He's the Son of GOD. His name's JESUS CHRIST. Maybe hard to believe knowin' me as you did before, but John Wagner and the Son of GOD are in this together."

~ end of chapter 11 ~
